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IN REMEMBRANCE OF HER

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FOURTH
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CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Mark 14:1-11

"Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." Mark 14:9 (NRSV)

He was mistaken. He said:

> " . . . wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

And he was wrong. She is not remembered much. She is not among the almost mythical personalities who emerge from the story of Jesus: Peter, John, Mary and Joseph, Mary Magdalene. In fact, she doesn't even have a name. But what she did just forty-eight hours or so before Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, caused him to say of her that she would be, or perhaps should be, remembered everywhere his own story was told.

We have been thinking about his story during the Lenten season. He left behind nothing in writing. There is no way to know whether or not he could write. He had no official biographer and except for a few very minor references, the historians of the day do not mention him. What we have are four brief accounts called Gospels, written decades after his life. They make no attempt to be biographies and histories. They tell some of the things that happened to him during a period of three years; what he said and did and how people reacted. They tell how he came from Nazareth into Lower Galilee talking about the Kingdom of God and how, according to him, God's Kingdom was very different from what the people had been taught. It was for everyone. People who were excluded by rigid laws of religion, morality and custom: people who were crippled, blind and sick; people who were too busy worrying about where their next meal would come from to pay attention to religion; and children, children who had no status, no life in the Roman Empire until a father decided to keep them. All these were the kinds of people Jesus said were in the Kingdom.

And then he, himself, acted as if that Kingdom of God were actually present: as if God's inclusive love was actually operational, right there in their midst. Inclusive love was not a theory. It was the way he acted and lived. He ate with the undesirables. He treated the women of questionable virtue with respect. He welcomed the sick and blind and crippled and didn't seem to mind their imperfections. He touched a leper and allowed little children to interrupt very serious discussions of theology.

The way Mark remembers it, crowds of people, those "nuisances and nobodies," started to pay attention, became intrigued with what he was saying and how he was living. And they started to gather wherever he was, great, noisy crowds of people in the region of Capernaum where he and his friends kept a house. When he moved to another location, the crowds followed. One time he tried to elude them by crossing the lake in a boat, but they got to the other side before he did and were there to meet him. Morning, noon and night they came: old people, sick people, poor people.

And then, as Mark remembers, lawyers started to show up in the crowds. The authorities in Jerusalem had heard about what was going on in Galilee, and always nervous about any disturbance of the peace and order of Roman rule, sent lawyers – or Scribes – to investigate. They came armed with questions designed to discredit him, embarrass him, and maybe if they were lucky, provoke him to say something seditious, treasonous, so that Rome would intercede and snip this whole troubling movement in the bud.

Then he had come to Jerusalem itself. The writers of the four accounts devote one-half of their pages to the last week of his life. There had been a kind of spontaneous street demonstration. When he went to the Temple and caused a major disturbance, the authorities knew that they must act. Leadership sometimes requires unpleasant decisions. So be it. He must go.

Who knows what was going through his mind? He seems, in a way, to understand the forces he has set in motion. He alone seems to comprehend and to trust that this is all somehow in God's hands. And so even when his own welfare is clearly in danger, even when he is looking suffering and death in the face and asking God to deliver him from it, he is, at the same time, trusting God's care and putting himself in God's hands.

It was in the middle of that final week that he was a dinner guest in the home of Simon – not Simon Peter, but Simon who had a special name, Simon the Leper. What that probably means is that he had suffered from the dread disease and was now clean, although the fact that he is still called Simon the Leper leads to speculation that his condition was recurring. It's at dinner that the incident happens.

The men – and it would have been men only at Simon's house – were sitting and reclining on the floor, perhaps on mats, around a low table, eating from a common bowl, dipping chunks of bread into olive oil. A woman interrupts. The story is told differently by each Gospel. She is identified elsewhere as a sinner, a prostitute, or Mary. Here she remains anonymous. She carries an alabaster jar of ointment, precious perfume made from the nard plant. In the Song of Solomon it is identified with sensual love. It is also used to anoint dead bodies. It is quite valuable. Someone has calculated that a vase of the oil of nard was worth a year's wages for a laborer. If you had it, you used it very sparingly, maybe stretching its use out over a lifetime.

The woman breaks the jar and pours the ointment on his head. It was a moment, I think. . . the strong, pungent odor; the oil running down over his face, his neck; the unlikely, probably startling interruption. It was, in fact, fairly outrageous.

One of the other guests says the obvious. Such a waste! The oil could have been sold for cold, hard cash and given to the poor.

> "Let her alone. You always have the poor. . . you will not always have me," Jesus responded.

And then Mark reports that he said the most remarkable thing:

> "She has anointed my body beforehand for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

She remains curiously nameless in Mark's Gospel. Professor John Dominic Crossan has written a controversial book, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, which I have been using for this series of sermons, and makes a very surprising suggestion. It can't be proven, of course, but Crossan says it's at least reasonable to suspect that the nameless woman is Mark, the author of the Gospel. We don't know who the author was. There is no Mark of history – a John Mark who accompanies Paul a few years later, but it doesn't seem that he is the author. But, a woman, the author of one of the Gospels? Crossan argues that Jesus' inclusive love knew no gender discrimination. Women play no role other than having babies and preparing food in the world of the first century. But from the beginning, he welcomes women, speaks with them as intellectual equals, befriends them. The Kingdom includes women and men as equals. Crossan and others argue that there were women disciples: that their role was edited out over the centuries by the deepening patriarchal culture. And he speculates that "in remembrance of her" is the author's way of leaving behind a coded signature.

What we do know is that in the story she alone understands what is about to happen. On three separate occasions Jesus has tried to tell the disciples that there is trouble ahead, suffering and perhaps even death. Each time they argue with him, or deny it, or simply ignore it. The final effort to warn them about what is ahead stimulates James and John to a terribly inappropriate response: "Let us sit at your right hand and left," they ask Jesus as he tries to tell them he's facing his own death. Only this woman gets it. She alone knows that he's preparing to die.

There is no time left for pretense, for political or religious correctness. There is time only to say basic, simple, direct things like: "I'm with you. Thank you. I love you." even if you have to break rules and appear foolish to say them.

Have you ever been a fool for love? I'll bet there aren't many of us who can't recall a love note or letter, florid, excessive, foolish, or a time when we spent too much money – bought roses instead of carnations, or a time when we threw caution to the wind and emptied our heart and maybe our wallet. I emptied out my world globe bank and bought twenty-five packages of Juicy Fruit Gum for the new little blond girl who appeared in our fourth grade class, and I still feel a little foolish.

The late Paul Tillich wrote:

> "The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so." We neglect the "grace of wasteful self-surrender," he taught and then asked, "Are we not in danger of a religious and moral utilitarianism which asks for a reasonable purpose?" [*The New Being*, p. 48]

Of course, the money could have been given to the poor. Of course, you can spend money on food instead of stained glass windows. Of course, it makes sense to economize on art and use the money to build houses. Vincent Van Gogh would have made far more money and perhaps lived a long and pleasant life if he had painted houses

instead of sunflowers and irises and mysteriously swirling starry nights. But she has done "a good thing for me," Jesus says, and the word for good also means beautiful.

There is human value, Godly value, according to Jesus, in beauty – extravagance – passionate, spontaneous love – which exceeds functionality and utility. It is a point churches such as this one, planning expensive renovations and improvement take seriously. Of course there is a sin of ostentation and a worse sin of institutional pride that focuses on itself – its magnificent building – and ignores the pain of the world. An "edifice complex" we call it. But there is also, we have it on the best authority, a sin of utilitarianism which is unmindful of beauty and extravagance which misses the power and goodness of love, because it is too busy calculating, evaluating, economizing, prioritizing.

Frederick Buechner thinks it is a real problem for the church. The church, by the way, keeps nagging Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and writer, to fulfill his organizational responsibilities by attending Presbytery meetings, that is, to do something useful like attend a committee meeting instead of wasting time writing. Buechner says:

> "The church is destroyed by people who are afraid to be human, brave and loving, and to take chances. The church comes alive," Buechner says, when "for Christ's sake we are willing to look like fools; when we understand that without simplicity and passion and outlandishness, no church is worth ten cents." [*A Room Called Remember*, p. 125]

She was passionate and extravagant and eloquent in her love and Jesus said what she did will be told always in remembrance of her.

She understood, alone apparently, something of the extravagance of holy love played out in the life of this man. One way to avoid coming to terms with love in your own heart is simply to refuse to acknowledge the love another has for you. When the men refused to deal with it, deflected the topic of his own passionate commitment to God and the price he was prepared to pay, she alone was strong and brave enough to look at it, and deal with it. So she anointed his body for burial.

"It is the hardest chapter to write," Professor Crossan said when he came to the crucifixion: hard both for those who have faith in Jesus and those who have faith in the human race. It is this hard part, the part his own disciples tried to ignore as long as possible, the part of Christian faith anyone in his or her right mind would prefer to ignore or eliminate.

"Who needs some bloody guy hanging on a cross?" a working theologian asked at a conference recently and got everybody's dander up. But she was only putting into words the behavior of Jesus' own best friends.

Kathleen Norris, in her bestseller, *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography*, remembers that somehow she got all the way through Sunday School without ever hearing that Jesus died on the cross. She learned it from the movies. We were too busy being cheerful in church to talk about things like that, she says.

It's a lot to deal with. At the age of thirty-three he was a total failure in all the ways you and I measure success. Abandoned, humiliated, powerless, tortured, ridiculed, nailed to a cross on the city garbage dump. . . who needs it? There's enough grimness and sadness in the world already. Religion should add light and pleasantness to life.

Andrea Pfaff, a good friend of mine who was the head of our Division of Evangelism, tells about taking her seat in an airplane beside another business woman. They were attired similarly; both immediately took out briefcases, spread papers in front of them and worked silently throughout the flight. As they were landing, her seat mate asked about the tiny attractive pin Andrea wore. That's a "Celtic Cross," Andrea said. "I know about Celtic art," the woman said. "What's the cross about?"

Joanna Adams, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, says that lots of churches have stopped "doing Lent" these days. Lent, the season when the "not particularly upbeat truth about the human condition is laid bare. To tell the truth," she says, "I do not especially like to dwell on the truth about the human condition. It is a sobering experience. These days people prefer their religion lite: reduced commitment, easy on the ethics. . . doesn't amount to much but it makes you feel good, at least for a while."

Lent. L.E.N.T. – "Let's Eliminate Negative Thinking," a popular television preacher said recently.

But the way Mark tells it, the events of the last week are pretty much the whole story, or at least the essential conclusion to the story without which all the rest becomes irrelevant. At the heart of it all is a cross and then an empty tomb, but he would warn us about getting to the empty tomb too quickly. For that, surprisingly, makes no

sense at all, other than an icon for springtime and daffodils unless we spend time with the realities of Good Friday and crucifixion. It's the hard part, the hard to understand part.

Our best thinkers have invested their intellectual energy in the effort to comprehend and explain it. There are various theologies – atonement theories constructed across the centuries: none of them quite adequate, it has always seemed to me.

Jesus died on the cross as a substitute victim, punished for human sin. He got what we deserve – is one of the most familiar. And while it contains important truth, it is not adequate.

In his death on the cross he was God's complete identification with us: even in our own mortality, is another theory – true but not adequate.

> "I doubt that it is given to the human being to understand completely the blessed passion and precious death," Madeleine L'Engle wrote. [*The Irrational Season*, p. 29]

And so it is at this time, the week before we remember the events of Palm Sunday, on a day known to the church down through the centuries as Passion Sunday, that I find it helpful to put the theologies, the theories, aside and to focus simply on what happened and what he did, apparently willingly, to live out his own love for God and his friends. I find it helpful to lay aside the intellectual quest a while and stand, as the old hymn suggests, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus."

I find it helpful to revisit what she did when confronted with the reality of what he was about to do – her extravagance and passionate love – and in some small way to learn from her.

I do know this. We make more mistakes loving too little than loving too much. I know that among my regrets, I regret not expressing love for one reason or another, not letting dear ones know how very much I loved them, until it was too late. I do not feel regret for expressing too much love, or expressing it too extravagantly and spontaneously. That is not usually our problem. You and I, I think, ordinarily are too cautious, too prudent, too tight, too stingy with our passion.

One of my file treasures is a speech a Yale professor made at a library dedication one time, in which, instead of the usual dedicatory rhetoric, told his audience about the recent death of his wife and how he was tortured by the love he did not express.

> "Why was I so dim, so inhibited, so finicky, so embarrassed? Love them while you can," he advised his young listeners, "and never, never be embarrassed."

That's what she did, this nameless woman. And it was her unembarrassed love, her extravagant and passionate love for this strange, compelling man that caused him to say of her:

> "Wherever this story is remembered, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

And that is what you and I should do in these holy days of Lent. . . find some way to break open our own hearts and to tell him, "thank you. . . I am with you. . . I love you." Perhaps the ways available to us to do that are the people around us, the people God gives us to love and care for.

And perhaps it is in our poor, hurried praying that you and I can, with some extravagant passion, respond in love and gratitude and devotion.

God's own extravagant love for the world was in him, we believe. God's love is what is expressed in his precious death, terrible beauty of holy love, for you – for me. And so. . .

> Were the whole realm of nature mine,
> That were a present far too small;
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.
> [Verse 4, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"]

Amen.